

eye ON PSI CHI

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Questions (and Answers) Every Student Should Know When Preparing for Graduate School¹

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Applying to graduate school in psychology can be both exhilarating and daunting. With fall fast approaching and application deadlines looming, there is no better time to seek expert guidance and demystify the process. In this article, our three esteemed graduate school experts generously share their wisdom to address the most popular questions that psychology students often encounter during the application process. Discover the keys to your successful graduate school application.

With so many students applying to graduate school, what can I do to stand out from the crowd?

Julie: Be uniquely yourself. No one else has your exact life experience. Describe the unique/diverse perspectives you would bring to a cohort. Tell your story and why that story motivates you to pursue psychology.

Mitch: It seems daunting to consider that admissions rates are so low. But fear not! About half of applicants do not really seem to understand that PhD programs are science-based approaches to psychology and thus require some exposure to prior research training. Many others

unfortunately have not identified a specific area of research they are interested in, or a mentor who has agreed to take a student in the year they are applying. Beyond these straightforward issues, however, it is important to convey that you have scientific ideas and questions—some may even emerge from your prior professional or lived experiences—that you are interested in investigating. And by definition, those are unique to you!

Jocelyn: I agree with my colleagues—be yourself! We each have unique talents and skills that make us who we are. Highlight what makes you stand out from the rest. This includes providing specific examples that illustrate how you “fit” into the program you are applying to. Of course, be sure to research the program to identify how you connect to it. Your “story” should be interesting and should engage the reviewers from the beginning to the end.

What is the biggest mistake students make when applying to graduate programs?

Julie: I don’t know if it’s the “biggest mistake,” but it would certainly be doing yourself a disservice not to do your research on each program. It is poor form to ask questions during an interview about general information you can easily find on the program’s website. Nevertheless, there is nothing wrong with asking nuanced questions about information you have learned

¹Previously published in *Eye on Psi Chi*, 28(1, 2023), p. 16-18.

from the program's website. That lets faculty know that you are genuinely interested in what the program has to offer.

Mitch: It seems that many applicants have a checklist mentality to their application. Get good grades + join a lab + write an essay = admission. But it's really about the way you discuss how your academic and research experiences made you think, and how inquisitive, analytical, and thoughtful you are that makes a big difference in conveying your potential as a scientist or clinician. It is so important to convey your ability to think scientifically within your materials and not just the number of prior experiences you have had.

Jocelyn: Not doing your research. You need to know what the program is looking for in a competitive applicant. What are the requirements for the program? Do you meet these requirements? How might you stand out from other applicants? Why should the program accept you? Have you thoroughly reviewed the application? Also, ask someone to review your application (e.g., personal statement and CV).

How many schools should I apply to?

Julie: I don't know that there is a magic number. I'd encourage you to be thoughtful and realistic based on:

- cost (money, time, and effort),
- interest (knowing that you genuinely want to attend the program), and
- requirements (having the general experiences the program is requesting).

Mitch: It is common to apply to 10–15 graduate schools, but only if those schools and mentors are a genuine match. Applying to a school just because it has a recognizable name is not a good enough reason to apply since you are matching to a lab as much as a program. And many applicants apply 1–3 times before they find that match, so it is perhaps better to be selective and patient.

Jocelyn: I typically recommend about 6–10 schools categorized into three categories: safety programs, target programs, and reach programs. Safety programs are those you are interested in and believe you are very likely to be accepted into. Target programs are those that you are very interested in and feel confident about your acceptance chances. Reach programs are your dream programs that interest you but are highly competitive with low acceptance rates. Ultimately, it is important to identify the programs that are the best fit for you.

What can you do with a master's vs. a PhD degree?

Julie: This depends. Those with a master's tend to be in frontline service provider roles (though there are MANY exceptions to this sweeping generality I am making, so take this with a grain of salt). Those with a doctoral degree likely differentiate themselves most in teaching, research, leadership, and assessment roles.

Mitch: This may all change quite soon. APA is working on accreditation criteria for masters-level programs, and it is possible that some jurisdictions will start to allow limited practice with a master's only. In fact, some states already do. But in 2023, a career as a practicing psychologist, or a role as a university professor is almost always going to require doctoral degree.

Jocelyn: With a master's degree, you are a specialist in a subfield of psychology. As a specialist, you have special knowledge and skills that may be applied in a variety of settings. For example, you may find jobs in academic settings: in local, state, and federal government; in health care and mental health services; and in business. Of course, with a PhD, your options are greater, and as my colleague mentioned, you need a doctoral degree to be a practicing psychologist. The point here is that you can do a lot with an advanced degree in psychology. You have options!

So many things are important on my graduate school application: letters of recommendation, internships, research experience, publication experience, high grades, interview skills, writing skills, grades, GRE scores, etc. Could you rank these items by importance or give me some idea of what I should prioritize?

Julie: Another great, but impossible question! The phrase "they're the whole package" exists for a reason. Highlight ways you excel in each of these categories while remaining honest.

If I were to make a sweeping generalization, some programs are moving away from the GRE, so these scores may not be relevant.

A great letter of recommendation (LOR) can really boost an application. Ask for LORs from people who really know you. It is often helpful to provide the person writing the LOR with your CV and some bullet-point information of accomplishments of which you are proud. Anecdotally, LORs that talk about an applicant's punctuality may send a message that the writer doesn't have much to say about the applicant.

Mitch: As indicated above, none of these are important at all if the applicant can't articulate how these experiences and credentials made them think about science. Having said that, a student's contribution to a paper before they begin graduate school usually does not warrant authorship on a publication. So the number of publications on the application often says more about their advisor's generosity than the applicant themselves. Many programs are dropping the GRE. Writing and interview skills remain quite important for most.

Jocelyn: All of these factors are important to consider in a graduate school application. Graduate schools are looking for well-rounded students who have good grades and are actively engaged on and off campus. This includes active involvement in campus, community, and professional organizations. Be a joiner! If you can work or volunteer as a research/teaching assistant, this can also be helpful. Not only will you acquire great skills, but you have an opportunity to work closely with a faculty member who can write a strong letter of recommendation for you.

What kind of financial aid is available to those in graduate school?

Julie: It depends. The loans and grants available to you may vary based on income and the type of program in which you are enrolled. Check out: <https://studentaid.gov/>

Mitch: In the case of PhD degree programs at non-profit schools, you should expect a full tuition remission and a modest stipend (\$20–30K) for the academic year. This is not available at all schools, but it common at many accredited institutions.

Jocelyn: You should check with the respective graduate program for information about financial assistance. Most programs offer fellowships, teaching, and research assistantships. Some faculty members may have grants that provide a stipend for graduate assistants. There is also funding available through various federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation (<https://www.nsfgrfp.org/>) or National Institutes of Health (<https://researchtraining.nih.gov/career/graduate>). Of course, check out the APA for funding opportunities (<https://www.apa.org/science/leadership/students/funding>).

Most of my top choices are across the country, making in-person interviews difficult to impossible. How important are the interviews to the total process? Do Zoom interviews lead to equitable success?

Julie: Interviews are very important. I would not attend a program if I was unable to meet faculty or current students. The program is interviewing you, but you are also interviewing them! Programs may not have returned to in-person interviewing after the COVID-19 pandemic. This may actually make the interviewing process more equitable as the cost of travel can be prohibitive for some. On a virtual interview, ask if a tour can be given of the facility or if there are videos available for you to get a sense of the facility and the local area.

Mitch: Interviews are extremely important—virtual or not—because your relationship with your mentor is likely to be a huge part of your graduate school experience, and perhaps even an important one for the rest of your career. Many have to make a decision on who to select based on only about 30 minutes of interaction at an interview. Whether this occurs over Zoom or in-person may be less important than the extent that you can really learn about each other's interest and work style. It also is important to get to know the location and general climate of a graduate program, and that is much harder to determine via Zoom. Interviews with graduate students may be able to help offer important information in these cases.

Jocelyn: If you made it to the interview stage, you are a contender. Interviews are important and give you an opportunity to learn more about the department, prospective mentor, students, and the environment. If possible, an in-person interview is ideal. If an in-person interview is not possible, virtual interviews are fine and can lead to “equitable” outcomes. Many programs are opting for virtual interviews and have become more adept in conducting them. Just be sure to strengthen your online presence. Be camera ready, make sure you have reliable internet access, a quiet location for the interview, etc. As mentioned, ask for a virtual tour of the department to get a sense of resources available to you. If given the opportunity, schedule virtual interviews with graduate students to learn more about the program from a student's perspective.

I am not a psychology major, but I am interested in applying to a psychology graduate program. How will this affect my chances?

Julie: This depends on the program, your previous experience, and your ability to express the reasoning behind your interest. One of the beautiful things about psychology is that it can be applied to almost everything. For example, tell a thoughtful story of how your political science background is relevant in the work you are passionate about pursuing in the specialty of psychology.

Of note, you may still be required to have prerequisite coursework, so be sure to check the program's requirements.

Mitch: Maybe not too much, if you have gotten some research experience in a psychology lab and can speak well to research and theories in psychology.

Jocelyn: Psychology is “everywhere” so no worries. Be sure to “connect the dots” by explaining how your major and experiences can be applied to your interest in psychology. If you have a minor in psychology, this will help. Depending on your program of interest, you may need to take a few prerequisite courses. As with all applicants, your application needs to stand out and make a strong case for why you should be considered for the graduate program.



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Embarking on Career Exploration? Start a Career Conversation²

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Albert Einstein College of Medicine

The holiday season is over. You probably enjoyed the parties, received presents, and were asked the inevitable question: “What do you want to do when you graduate?” The parties and presents were probably fun. This seemingly innocuous question, however, might have been quite stress-inducing for you, or any student, if you are not sure what you want to do!

The bachelor’s degree in psychology helps build skills, such as interpersonal, problem solving and communication skills, which are “highly valued by employers” (Haskell, 2012) and the “psychology bachelor’s degree qualifies a person for a large number of jobs.” But at the same time, a degree in psychology does not “uniquely qualify a person for any particular job” (Landrum, 2018). Without a direct path toward a specific career, how do you decide on a career path? Furthermore, how can you choose a career path when you do not even know the options available?

² Previously published in *Eye on Psi Chi*, 27(3, 2023), p. 14-16.”

Enter the Informational Interview

An informational interview is an opportunity to learn about the real-life experience of working in a position, company, or field that interests you. However, the term “informational interview” is frequently misunderstood. First, there is a misconception that only people who are actively seeking jobs do these interviews. Second, the phrase is a misnomer. This is not an actual interview. The purpose of this meeting is not to get a job. It is a dialogue to gather information. A better phrase to use is **casual career conversation** and these conversations can be helpful in several ways.

Get exposed to new career paths. Informational interviews can introduce you to opportunities you may never have considered or even heard about.

Get an insider’s view of the field. You can hear specifics about a typical day, learn what strengths are valued in this field, and find out if you have the necessary skills to determine if this career is a good fit for you.

Get career planning guidance. You can discover what steps to take for a particular career path, learn where jobs are posted, and get insight to help you market yourself more successfully when you are ready to apply and interview.

What Is the Hidden Job Market?

This is not the time or place to ask for a job, but it may lead to a more successful job search down the road. Importantly, these conversations can help you tap into the hidden job market.

The phrase *hidden job market* refers to jobs “found through networking rather than traditional job searching” because these jobs are unadvertised or not yet advertised. These opportunities may not be available to the public for several reasons, such as the job is not open yet, a company may be considering an internal candidate, or the company prefers to use employee referrals (Doyle, 2022).

Tapping into the hidden job market is beneficial because there is an advantage to being first to reach the recruiter. Companies typically receive 250 applications per job listing, with larger companies receiving even more. Of these, only four to six people will be invited for an interview (Economy, 2015). The earlier you send in your application, the more likely your information will be reviewed and hopefully considered for the position.

What's Your Goal?

Before you ask anyone for an informational interview, there are preparatory steps you should take to make the career conversation more useful. First, identify what information would be useful to you **at this time**. Are you looking for information about careers to consider, or do you need specific information about a particular path?

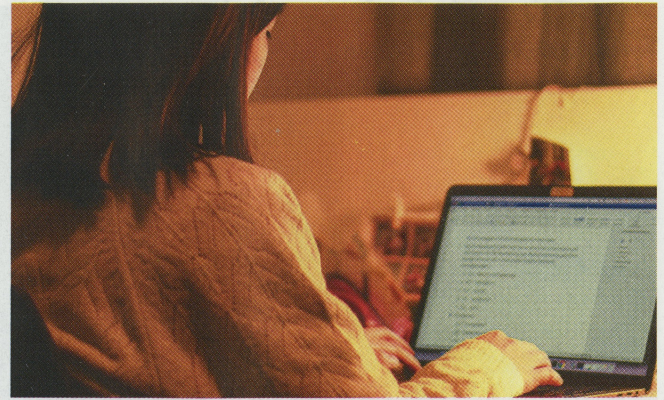
Second, identify people to help you achieve your goals. To find these individuals, start with your personal contacts: family and friends, current and former colleagues, and LinkedIn contacts. Other places to find people include your college alumni office, professional associations, conference speakers, and even people in the news. Look for people who are doing something you would like to explore further.

I have had many conversations with students and postdoctoral scholars concerned about contacting someone with whom they have not spoken in years. If this is a hurdle for you, change your mindset. Caryn Siegel Moss, MEd, Manager of Professional Development Design at Amplify (an education curriculum and assessment company) always welcomes requests for informational interviews and encourages students to not be afraid to make the request.

Most people are happy to share their experience or knowledge with you and to pay it forward for support they received along their own career paths. If they can't make the time, they'll tell you. (C. Siegel Moss, personal communication, December 8, 2022)

If you approach someone professionally, you are likely to be surprised by their willingness to speak with you. And, if they are not willing to help, do not be discouraged. Remember you are not asking for a job; you are asking for information.

Another worry I hear is concern about wasting someone's time. An analogy may help change your mindset. Consider being approached by an old acquaintance, who is moving to your town and who wants advice. It is likely you would willingly share



information about your experience and even be excited to tell them anything they would like to know.

How Do I Request and Prepare for Informational Interviews?

Send a request in a brief but professional email. Steve Dalton, in his book *The 2-Hour Job Search* (Dalton, 2020), offers guidelines for writing these requests, suggesting emails that are 100 words or less and that have no mention of “jobs” anywhere in the request. Someone is more likely to respond if you have a connection to that person, so make sure to mention the connection in the first sentence.

Do your research. Once you have lined up an informational interview, conduct advance research. An informational interview is a networking opportunity. Consider your goal and what information you would like to get. Then research the person, company, and field to prepare questions that would be most useful for you. Study the industry lingo, be up to date on news in the field, and gather anything else to make sure you are ready for this conversation.

Come prepared. Create an agenda and share it in advance to manage expectations and let the interviewee understand what you are planning to ask.

Keep your intro short. My students often worry about what to say about themselves. In the informational interview, I suggest you follow the **80/10/10 rule**—80% of the time listen, 10% of the time ask questions, and 10% share information about yourself. John Lees, author of *The Success Code* says, “What frustrates busy people is when they agree to an informational interview, and then the person seeking advice spends 15 minutes talking about himself and his job search” (Knight, 2016). You are not there to market yourself. Simply, prepare a brief introduction about yourself—your goals, your background, and most importantly what information you need.

Be an active listener. Be present and really listen to answers during an informational interview. Show interest by nodding, keeping eye-contact, and asking thoughtful follow-up questions. As the conversation progresses, try to go with the flow. Do not worry about getting answers to every one of your questions. The conversation may lead into productive, but unanticipated, areas of information.

No phones. Not only make sure to turn off all notifications, do not have your phone out at all. Have a pen and paper with your list of questions and bring printed copies of your agenda.



Think like a researcher. The goal of an informational interview is to get information. Shoba Subramanian, PhD, Principal Program Manager of University Partnerships at Amazon, who recently made a major career transition, really appreciates the wealth of information you can gain from these informal career conversations.

Informational Interviews allow you to collect data, much like scientific research. The more data you have from talking to multiple professionals and the more rigorous you are in analyzing common themes from the dataset, the more prepared and aware you will be to launch your career! (S. Subramanian, personal communication, December 10, 2022)

Prepare questions. Brainstorm questions about what the person is doing now, how they got there, where they are heading, and for any guidance to help your career exploration or job search. Here are questions to consider:

- What do you see as the potential for growth in this industry, this field?
- How did you get started? Can you tell me about your experience interviewing for your first job?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
- What are the most rewarding and difficult aspects of your job?
- What advice do you have about leveraging a psychology background to get a job in this area?
- Do you recommend any books to read?
- Can you tell me a little bit about a project you are working on right now?

What not to ask. You should not ask questions whose answers could be found by a quick online search (e.g., company mission, products, or office locations). Also, inappropriate are personal questions, such as questions about salary or age.

Wrap up on time. If you asked for 20 minutes of a person's time, stick to it. A terrific way to end is to ask to be in touch again ("You gave me a lot of great information. I would like to review what we discussed and do a little more research. Can I get back to you with questions?") or tap into their network ("Can I connect with you on LinkedIn?"). The last question I suggest you ask is for another name ("Is there anyone else with whom you suggest I meet?").

This is Your Network—Build and Maintain It!

The value of these personal and professional connections is tremendous (Freeland Fisher, 2019). Remember, this is not a one-off conversation. You are trying to build a relationship. So, after the informational interview, make sure to send a thank you note within 24 hours. Write a thoughtful and personalized note that shows gratitude but do not ask for favors or other requests. Consider sending an actual handwritten note. A recent article in *The New York Times* (Vora, 2022) discusses the power of hand-written thank-you notes. Because so few people write them, they have even more impact.

You are playing the long game with these informational interviews with the goal of developing a network and building relationships that might develop into future mentors and supporters. So, follow through on anything you promised, recap progress, and find ways you could be of value to them, such as sharing relevant articles or useful resources.

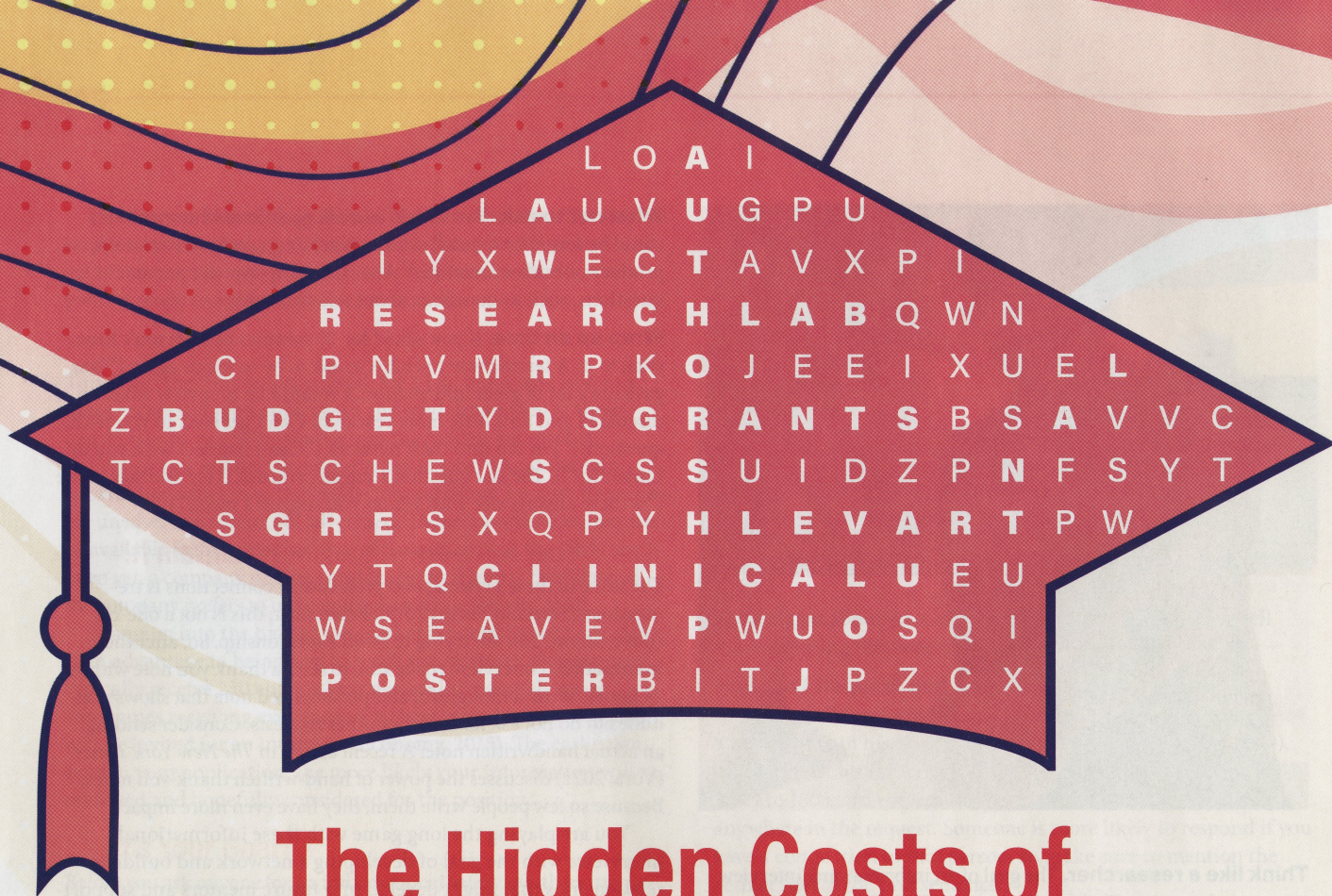
The time to start is now. It is the start of a new year. Consider doing more informational interviews as your new year's resolution so the next time someone asks about your plans after graduation, you have an answer! Happy interviewing!

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The Hidden Costs of Applying for Graduate School and Suggestions to Reduce Them³

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Although psychology is one of the most popular undergraduate majors, only a small percentage (approximately 14%) go on to earn a graduate degree (National Science Foundation, 2017). Acceptance into doctoral programs in clinical psychology is particularly competitive, with an estimated acceptance rate of 6% across programs of this type from 2016 through 2020 (American Psychological Association [APA] Commission on Accreditation, 2021). Recently, university administrators and faculty have actively acknowledged the importance of a diverse student body and

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have included socioeconomic diversity in that definition (e.g., University of North Carolina's Diversity Statement). However, the field has been slower to counteract the financial costs associated with gaining the required experience that can bottleneck acceptance into a graduate program in psychology.

Substantial resources exist to aid students who are considering applying to be part of the competitive group of majors who eventually continue on to graduate programs (e.g., APA's *Applying to Graduate School*, Psi Chi's *An Eye on Graduate School: Guidance Through a Successful Application*, and Princeton's *Mitch's Uncensored Advice for Applying to Graduate Programs in*

Clinical Psychology). These resources are exceedingly helpful in understanding the expectations for graduate school applicants and tend to describe that, in addition to a strong academic record, applicants are expected to demonstrate substantial research and clinical experience. To become competitive applicants, both authors of this article (a current faculty member and a current doctoral student) worked multiple jobs prior to enrolling in doctoral programs, each with one higher paid job aimed at paying bills and the others (low paid or unpaid) aimed at gaining needed experience. This article will focus on the hidden costs associated with becoming a competitive applicant for graduate school

and will recommend some ways to defray those costs.

Research Assistantships on a Budget

In addition to strong grades in classes such as Research Methods and Statistics, successful applicants often work in multiple research labs and obtain a letter of recommendation from at least one research advisor. These research positions are typically unpaid and might require between four and six hours per week. If students take on additional responsibility (a great outcome for a potential applicant!), the hourly requirements can increase.

For students who are juggling those research hours against paid employment or family care, this often crucial requirement can be burdensome. One way to decrease this burden is to seek out research-focused courses, which many academic programs will allow to count as a requirement for a psychology major. Although this means that the student must pay for the credit, the time spent in a research lab then replaces the time and money that would otherwise be spent fulfilling the requirements for a different course. Further, students can look into other independent research opportunities within programs that result in hands-on exposure to research methods while also counting for credit, such as undergraduate honor's theses, master's theses, and capstone options.

Once students acquire experience, they might be more desirable for the less common, paid positions. For example, some competitive paid summer programs provide research experience; a list of them is available through APA's Undergraduate Research Opportunities & Internships. Additionally, some faculty members are able to pay research assistants through their grants. Last, students can earn their own funding by taking advantage of research grants and awards available through *Psi Chi* and APA.

Research Dissemination on a Budget

For particularly competitive programs, applicants are often expected to demonstrate their understanding of the research process and research dissemination through authorship on presentations and publications. In psychology, the order of

authorship represents the individual's contribution to the project. Although a first-name presentation or publication is impressive and impactful, that role comes with responsibilities. A first author often travels to a conference to present the research or takes the heaviest load when writing a paper.

Research Conventions

Professional research conventions (e.g., the annual APA Convention) can be important ways to learn about the field, research dissemination, and to begin professional networks. Attending a convention can provide valuable professional context for a potential applicant, but presenting at a convention is more meaningful on an application. Potential presenters will typically submit a written description of their research project by a provided deadline. The proposals will be reviewed, and the authors of the strongest proposals will be invited to present their research in one of a variety of formats, often a physical poster or a short talk. Although there are no costs to submitting a proposal, if a proposal is accepted, the lead author is often expected to pay a convention registration fee, and pay for travel and accommodations at the convention site. When attending a convention, a presenter will typically need to own or purchase professional clothing and shoes. Additionally, if the proposal was accepted as a poster, the presenter will need to print the poster (often on 36' x 48' posterboard).

So how can students help to reduce the costs associated with convention attendance and presenting their research? Since the pandemic, many conventions have retained a virtual presentation option. This cuts costs substantially, because presenters do not need to travel, although it does limit the networking opportunities that would otherwise be available. Your research advisor might not be familiar with a virtual or nearby convention (i.e., some professors present at more distant national conventions rather than closer regional ones). However, if you can find a more suitable, reputable convention, your advisor will likely be supportive of submitting for that convention.

Some schools offer their own travel awards for current students. There are also numerous travel grants available for student presenters at conventions, although

interested students need to be mindful of deadlines. Additionally, some conventions provide discounts on the attendance fee for students who are also first-author presenters. Further, students might elect to find more affordable lodging outside of the convention hotel, such as an Airbnb. It is common for students to share lodging and split the costs, as well. One of the article authors went to her first convention in Honolulu, Hawaii, and rented an Airbnb facing the ocean with a colleague within walking distance of the convention. They paid a fraction of the cost of the convention hotel even after the convention discount code was applied. It is also important to ask about available support from the student's college. Some schools may cover the cost of printing a poster, particularly if their institution has its own printshop.

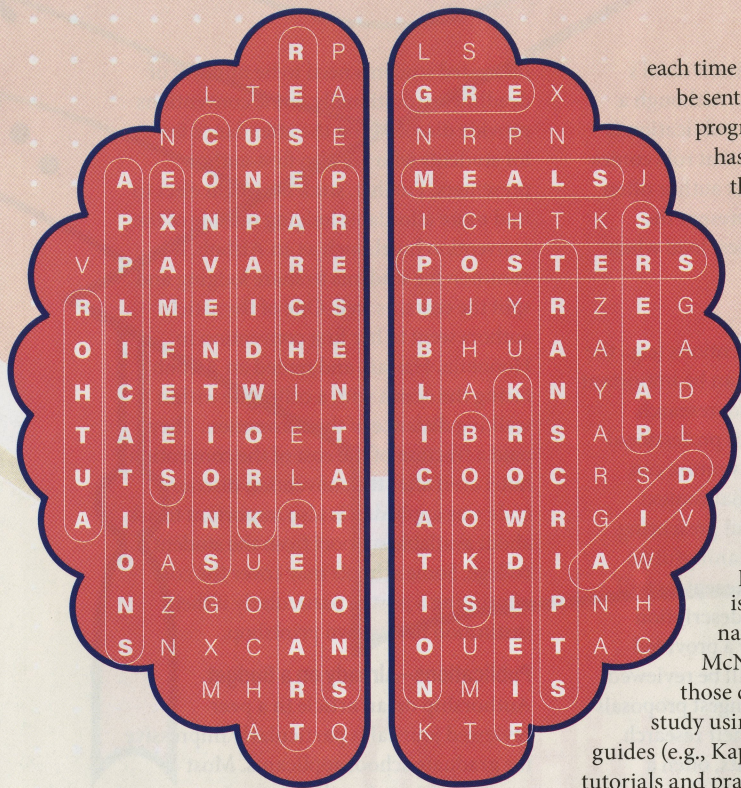
Publications—Already on a Budget

Authorship on an article in a peer-reviewed journal is particularly impressive for graduate school applicants. Most reputable journals will not require money, although the unpaid time spent writing and editing a manuscript can be substantial. Many students have free access to writing support at their school's writing center, which can be a particularly helpful resource for those who learned English as a second language. Applicants should work closely with their advisors to ensure that they avoid predatory publications—which are un reputable publications that often request that potential authors pay exorbitant fees (Richtig et al., 2018). This is distinct from an optional open access fee, which is an unrequired option for many high-quality journals that would allow others to freely access the article after publication. *Psi Chi* students have the option of submitting their work in its peer-reviewed *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research*.

Clinical Work on a Budget

Similar to research experience, students who attempt to gain clinical experience are often expected to work in unpaid or underpaid positions.

Also similar to the suggestions above regarding research, many schools will have fieldwork options available as part of a course requirement. Although still unpaid, this can be a great experience that allows students with no previous



experience to become more competitive for later paid positions.

Some potential applicants might gain paid clinical experience by working on a hotline or warmline. A hotline is for those in immediate crisis, whereas a warmline can provide early intervention or emotional support. The qualifications for a warmline are often a little less than other entry-level clinical positions and might allow potential applicants to begin gaining relevant experience. Similarly, students might find job openings with an undergraduate degree in community mental health agencies in roles such as case management or consumer advocacy, which can offer paid, though likely underpaid, introduction to clinical work.

Grading and Tests on a Budget

The Graduate Record Exam (GRE) General Test was widely required for graduate admission, with over 90% of psychology doctoral programs requiring the GRE and many more requiring or recommending the related subject test (Languin, 2019). The test itself is expensive, and many applicants benefited from expensive test preparation programs. In addition, once the test has been completed, students are charged a fee

each time they request their scores be sent to their prospective programs. However, as research has increasingly supported the conclusion that the GRE acts as a barrier for capable minoritized students (Gómez et al., 2021), many schools have dropped the test.

Due to the number of schools that have dropped the GRE requirement, it is important to first check whether the test is required for a desired program. If testing is required, there are national programs (e.g., McNair) that can help cover those costs, and self-paced study using published textbook guides (e.g., Kaplan) come with video tutorials and practice tests, which are a more affordable option compared to in-person or online asynchronous preparatory classes.

Application Costs

It is no secret that there are application fees when applying to programs, however, there are other costs of applying to consider that are less transparent. The costs of applications vary depending on program or setting and could range from \$0–\$125 per application with a mean of \$58 (e.g., *American Psychological Association Education Directorate*, 2019). Given the competitive admissions rates, it is common that one student will submit applications to multiple programs. Some programs offer financial hardship application fee waivers, and other programs might waive the fee even if the option is not advertised if they are contacted in advance of the application deadline. Along with the application, there are fees for other requirements, such as requesting official transcripts and GRE scores, so students should also be mindful of these when budgeting for the application cycle.

Moving Forward

Although it is possible to minimize the financial costs associated with gaining experience and still become a competitive applicant for graduate programs, it is

important to acknowledge the systemic flaw contributing to the bottlenecking of graduate student acceptances based on the advantage of financial privilege. Students can help prepare themselves for applications by doing rigorous work to gain experience, of course, but also by doing research ahead of time illuminating the potential hidden costs of graduate school. Identifying these hidden costs supports students in more informed planning, defraying costs where possible, and setting a realistic budget based on their own means and circumstances. Although the application process remains stressful, financial distress should not be part of the equation for a successful graduate school application cycle in the field of psychology.

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Adjusting Expectations for Recent Graduates Entering the Workforce⁴

Staci L. Parker, PhD

President, Maryland Career Development Association

It was 1969. I was five years old and about to embark on what I would imagine to be the best day of my life: my first day in public school. I had watched my oldest sister go to school and return with fascinating stories and samples of what she had been learning while she was there. She said it was “Homework”—lessons she practiced at home. “Goody,” I thought. I would help her do some of the practice lessons

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and, when the time came for me to go to school, I would be ready!

Fast forward to my first day of school. I had one of my best dresses on, black patent leather shoes, and laced socks that folded down to drape over them. My mother styled my hair just the way I loved it and as a gift, she gave me a blue patent leather briefcase—I looked like a miniature professor. Mission accomplished. My goal was to become a teacher one day. After all, I loved learning, so it was befitting to have such an ambition.

The big moment came. I walked in the room that would literally define my career decades later. My expectations were much higher. My idea of going to school had been a fantasy for years, as a young student. I thought that school was a place for students to learn, where teachers engaged and opened young minds to endless possibilities in education. Instead, I walked in a classroom of sheer chaos. I thought in my five-year-old mind, “This cannot be right! I must be in the wrong class.”

There were children running around

Adjusting Workforce Expectations



Prepare before you get out there.



Be vigilant in gathering current research, it will be beneficial for navigating to where you are headed.



Make industry connections.

recklessly. “Where’s the teacher?” my mother asked another parent walking in with us. I thought to myself, “Please don’t leave me here with them,” but once the adults sorted everything out, they left us ... me, in this environment. This was not what I expected in those early years of preparing myself to enter school. This was the moment that I decided that I no longer wanted to be a teacher. No one seemed to be prepared in the classroom, and because of the chaos I saw, I made a declaration at the age of seven to become a psychologist instead. After elementary school, junior high, and high school, I went to college and received my undergraduate degree in psychology. Some years later, I attended a graduate dual degree program in organization psychology. I kept the promise to my seven-year-old self and achieved a PhD.

I’m sharing this story because we all have expectations. This particular story illustrates expectations surrounding education, what to anticipate after we have graduated, and creating a plan that ensures the outcome we expect. Let’s take a moment to discuss the expectations one might have as a recent graduate entering the workforce and how to apply the theories of an academic career so that your expectations come to fruition.

Key Elements

There are three key elements for adjusting the expectations that one may have as a graduate entering the workforce. One begins at the beginning of your academic career. The second is experienced throughout your studies. And the third element begins after graduation.

The Beginning: *Preparing a Strategic Plan*

I have often said to my clients when providing consultation services, whether in the academic arena or in other industries, that how you begin your journey is very important for meeting your goals. Preparing a strategic education plan that provides a roadmap for meeting your expectations is essential when you are a student and is your responsibility as well. It is also wise to begin with that reference because it will be the reminder of why you made the choice for higher education in the first place. Therefore, it is imperative that the institution with which you choose to partner has similar expectations of your own. This is important because this knowledge and partnership will likely produce the experience you want. In other words, do your homework like I did as a five-year-old,

think beyond graduation and how you plan to use what you learn, then prepare for the real thing. According to the theory of person–environment fit, it is important that the needs of both the individual and the organization be fulfilled, based on what both bring to the professional environment (Edwards, 2008). You are merely forming a symbiotic relationship before your academic career and maintaining it through the duration of your time with the organization. This relationship also describes your academic experience and will define your professional experience as well.

The Middle: *The Difference Between Theory and Real-World Experiences*

Today, many higher education programs require internships as part of the criteria for graduation. Some provide experiential learning, in the way of mentorship programs, as a bridge to transitioning the student to the teacher or the ability to apply theory through practice. According to a study I conducted, “the last 25 years have examined the benefits of mentoring. Research has shown that mentoring improves career outcomes for individuals and that mentoring produced a



Understand that the **achievements you accomplish in your academic studies translate to your success in the workplace.**

Do your best and there will be little adjustment in your expectations that you'll need to make.

substantial influence on career outcomes” (Parker, 2019). Understanding the difference between theory, real-world experiences, and the utilization of both is what you should learn to distinguish. We all learn differently. Some of us prefer to learn by theory, others prefer to learn through application; however, the most effective method for preparing for the workplace is utilizing both. A plan that provides the balance of what you learn with how you will apply it in the workplace is something that should be cultivated throughout your educational experience so that your transition is seamless.

The End: Preparing For Your Transition

When the plan has been followed and the work has been completed, preparation to transition is necessary. I have witnessed students nearly tearing their hair out by the roots because of the inevitable transition into the workplace, as if it was not expected. If the truth be told, the end of your program is the time to wrap up the phase of your academic career so your professional career can be ushered in. Unless you are planning to continue on to achieve other academic endeavors,

my advice is to do the following from start to finish. To reiterate, research the college or university that provides you with the kind of experience you want as well as the program you wish to pursue for your intended career. You should also conduct prior research on the industry that you plan to pursue after graduation. It could be a great mistake if you choose an academic program that does not have a professional future.

Periodically check your intended career choice for changes in employment. According to a study conducted by Indeed (2022), “there are a few skills that employers look for in job candidates no matter what the open position is, and having these skills can make you more marketable to recruiters. These skills include communication, problem solving, and teamwork.”

Over the course of your academic studies, industries can change, but not expectations of what the employer requires—COVID taught us this. As a result of the pandemic, how we conduct business and how we work was heavily influenced. Therefore, certain types of jobs were phased out; however, others were created. It is always ideal to be aware

of tipping points so that you are able to pivot, when necessary, rather than perish.

Once you have started your academic journey, become familiar with officials who can guide you through the process. I would recommend that you share your own plan with your counselor or mentor, for clarity and practicality. You never want to feel that you are in the wrong place because your expectations are too high, too low, or unrealistic.

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Name of Program	Submission Deadline	Who Can Apply?
Undergraduate and Graduate Research Grants	Jan. 15, May 1, and Oct. 15	Undergraduate, Graduate
Kay Wilson Officer Team Leadership Award	March 1	Chapter
Professional Development Grants for Teachers of Psychology	March 15, Oct. 31	Faculty
Florence Denmark Faculty Advisor Award	April 1	Faculty Advisor (chapter nominates)
Ruth Hubbard Cousins Chapter Award	April 15	Chapter
Unrestricted Travel Grants	May 5, Dec. 5	Undergraduate, Graduate, Faculty
Model Chapter Awards	May 15	Chapter
Undergraduate Scholarships	June 24	Undergraduate
Prosser Scholarship for Women of Color	June 24, July 1	Undergraduate, Graduate
Faculty Research Grants	July 1	Faculty
Graduate Scholarships	July 1	Graduate
APAGS Junior Scientist Fellowships	July 15	Graduating Undergraduate, Graduate
Chapter Activity Grants	Sept. 20	Chapter
Regional Research Awards	Deadlines vary	Undergraduate, Graduate
Regional Travel Grants	Deadlines vary	Undergraduate, Graduate
Diversity Article Awards	Open year-round	Undergraduate, Graduate, Faculty

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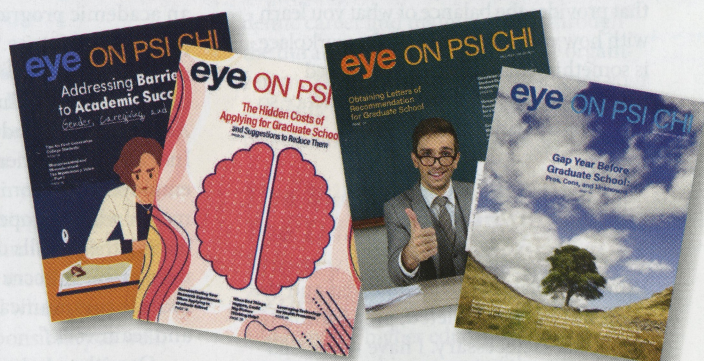
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